SŪRAH 62

Al-Jumu ʿah

(The Congregation)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed after *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks, and whilst both deal with the same theme, the current chapter nonetheless takes a different approach, using a different style and different effects. It aims to drive home to the Muslim community in Madīnah that it has been chosen to undertake responsibility for the divine faith. It wants the Muslim community to understand that to be in such a position of trust is a great favour God has bestowed on it. It also wants them to understand that by God choosing His last Messenger from among the Arabs is yet another great favour, one that merits a proper expression of gratitude to God. In this context, the *sūrah* provides certain duties that must be fulfilled by the people who responded to God's Messenger and who accepted the trust. Both the community and the trust are to continue across generations, without fail, because God has determined that the seed planted by the Prophet will continue to grow. The Muslim community has taken over the trust abandoned and neglected by the Children of Israel. They severed their relation with heaven so as to carry the Torah in the same way as an ass would carry books.

The *sūrah* drives this fundamental truth home to Muslims in general, starting in particular with the first Muslim community in Madīnah, which was responsible for implementing a practical model of the Islamic

system. It also applies to all future Muslim generations, as the *sūrah* clearly indicates.

At the same time, the *sūrah* addresses certain situations relevant to that first Muslim community, during its long and elaborate transformation process in accordance with Islamic requirements. This process involved the elimination of a host of hindrances, such as a keenness to make quick material gains and other temptations relating to money. These were to be replaced by proper awareness of the great trust assigned to the Muslim community. The *sūrah* also refers to a particular incident when the Prophet was once delivering his Friday sermon. A trade caravan had arrived at the same time, and the moment people learned of this, they left the mosque to take part in the music and entertainment that traditionally accompanied a caravan's arrival. According to some reports, only 12 of the Prophet's Companions, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar, remained listening to his sermon. Whilst these reports may not be very accurate as regards the numbers they mention, nonetheless the departure of some people from the mosque was certain. Hence, it merited this mention in the Qur'ān.

This incident demonstrates the great effort exerted in the cultivation of that first Muslim community's fine manners and behaviour, this until it achieved a lofty standard, making it a unique example in the history of Islam and mankind generally. In this way, the *sūrah* teaches us to always remain patient when we try to build the Islamic character in any community.

The *sūrah* also includes an invitation to the Jews to a mutual prayer wishing death for those who advocate falsehood. This comes in reply to their claims that they were God's only friends and His chosen people and that God's Messenger must be one of them. The *sūrah* confirms their unwillingness to accept such an invitation because they felt that the Muslims' claims were unfounded. The *sūrah* comments that death, from which such people try to escape, will inevitably catch up with them. They will be returned to God who knows all, and He will tell them the truth of their doings. This statement does not, however, only apply to the Jews. Rather, the *sūrah* facilitates its appreciation by believers as well. They too must realize this fact in order to be able to discharge the duties assigned to them as advocates of God's message.

I

The Day of Congregation

Al-Jumu'ah
(The Congregation)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

يُسَبِّحُ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ
الْمَلِكِ الْقُدُّوسِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ ﴿١﴾

It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, (2)

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ
يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ
الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي
ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿٢﴾

to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise. (3)

وَآخَرِينَ مِنْهُمْ لَمَّا يَلْحَقُوا بِهِمْ
وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٣﴾

ذَٰلِكَ فَضْلُ ٱللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ ذُو ٱلْفَضْلِ ٱلْعَظِيمِ ﴿٤﴾

Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours. (4)

مَثَلُ ٱلَّذِينَ حُمِّلُوا۟ ٱلتَّوْرَىٰةَ ثُمَّ لَمْ يَحْمِلُوهَا كَمَثَلِ ٱلْحِمَارِ يَحْمِلُ أَسْفَارًۢا ۚ بِئْسَ مَثَلُ ٱلْقَوْمِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَذَّبُوا۟ بِـَٔايَٰتِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِى ٱلْقَوْمَ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers. (5)

قُلْ يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ هَادُوٓا۟ إِن زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَآءُ لِلَّهِ مِن دُونِ ٱلنَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوُا۟ ٱلْمَوْتَ إِن كُنتُمْ صَٰدِقِينَ ﴿٦﴾

Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' (6)

وَلَا يَتَمَنَّوْنَهُۥٓ أَبَدًۢا بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ ۗ وَٱللَّهُ عَلِيمٌۢ بِٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿٧﴾

But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. (7)

قُلْ إِنَّ ٱلْمَوْتَ ٱلَّذِى تَفِرُّونَ مِنْهُ فَإِنَّهُۥ مُلَٰقِيكُمْ ثُمَّ تُرَدُّونَ إِلَىٰ عَٰلِمِ ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ فَيُنَبِّئُكُم بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٨﴾

Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.' (8)

Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. (9)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ إِذَا نُودِىَ لِلصَّلَوٰةِ مِن يَوْمِ ٱلْجُمُعَةِ فَٱسْعَوْا۟ إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ ٱللَّهِ وَذَرُوا۟ ٱلْبَيْعَ ۚ ذَٰلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ إِن كُنتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٩﴾

When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. (10)

فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ ٱلصَّلَوٰةُ فَٱنتَشِرُوا۟ فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ وَٱبْتَغُوا۟ مِن فَضْلِ ٱللَّهِ وَٱذْكُرُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ كَثِيرًا لَّعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴿١٠﴾

Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.' (11)

وَإِذَا رَأَوْا۟ تِجَٰرَةً أَوْ لَهْوًا ٱنفَضُّوٓا۟ إِلَيْهَا وَتَرَكُوكَ قَآئِمًا ۚ قُلْ مَا عِندَ ٱللَّهِ خَيْرٌ مِّنَ ٱللَّهْوِ وَمِنَ ٱلتِّجَٰرَةِ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ خَيْرُ ٱلرَّٰزِقِينَ ﴿١١﴾

A Universal Glorification

> *All that is in the heavens and all that is on earth extol the limitless glory of God, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verse 1)

The *sūrah* starts with a statement confirming the fact that everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory, adding a number of His attributes that have a subtle bearing on the theme of the *sūrah*. The *sūrah* is given the name *al-Jumu'ah*, meaning Friday, and it gives instructions about the special congregational prayer on that day, identifying that its time should be dedicated to remembrance of God. All distractions and business should be abandoned in pursuit of what is with God, which is better than everything else. Hence, the *sūrah* mentions God's attribute, the Sovereign, who owns everything. This is relevant to business, since

all trade normally seeks profit. The *sūrah* also states that God is Holy; He who is revered and glorified by all creatures in the universe. This attribute of God's contrasts with the entertainment mortals seek, distracting them from His remembrance. This opening verse also mentions that God is Almighty, which is relevant to the invitation made to the Jews for mutual prayer, and also to the death that is bound to happen to all. The last of God's attributes mentioned in this opening is His wisdom. Such divine wisdom determined the choice of the unlettered people from among whom God's last Messenger was selected to declare to them God's revelations, purify them and teach them the scriptures and wisdom.

The Messenger's Terms of Reference

Having started with this sublime glorification of God's limitless glory, the *sūrah* goes straight to its main theme:

> *It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest error, to them and to others yet to join them. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 2–3)

It is said that the Arabs were called *ummiyyūn*, or 'unlettered', because the great majority of them could neither read nor write. It is reported that the Prophet once defined how many days there are in a month, joining his two hands and pointing with his ten fingers three times, and saying: "We are an unlettered community: we neither reckon figures nor write." It is also said that a person who does not write is called *ummī*, meaning he is the same as when his mother, or *umm*, gave birth to him. Writing is something that is only learnt when a child grows up.

Alternatively, the Arabs might have been called Goyim, a Hebrew form by which the Jews called all non-Jews, and meaning Gentiles. Thus the word *ummiyyūn* becomes a form of *umamiyyūn*, which means 'belonging to other communities or nations'. Thus they distinguished themselves as God's chosen people, while the rest of mankind are Gentiles. Perhaps this suggestion is closer to the theme of the *sūrah*.

The Jews were awaiting a final Messenger from God who would arise from among themselves, uniting them after they had been divided into divergent groups, giving them power and leading them to victory. They used to tell the Arabs that he was soon to come. In His infinite wisdom, God chose an Arab as His last Messenger, i.e. a Gentile, because He knew that the Jews no longer had the qualities necessary to provide mankind's new leadership. Indeed, they had long deviated and were deep in error, as stated in *Sūrah* 61, The Ranks. Hence, they were no longer capable of being entrusted with God's message.

Moreover, in earlier times Abraham and his son Ishmael had said a prayer as they worked on building the Ka'bah: "*Our Lord, accept this from us; You are the One that hears all and knows all. Our Lord, make us surrender ourselves to You, and make out of our offspring a community that will surrender itself to You. Show us our ways of worship and accept our repentance; You are the One who accepts repentance, the Merciful. Our Lord, send them a Messenger from among themselves who shall declare to them Your revelations, and instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, and purify them. You are Mighty and Wise.*" (2: 127–129) Addressed centuries earlier, this prayer remained with God to be answered at the appropriate time, according to God's wisdom. Only then would it fulfil its role within the overall plan God has set in place for the universe. In this plan nothing occurs earlier or later than its appropriate time.

This prayer was answered in its exact wording, which is repeated here in this *sūrah*, reminding us of Abraham's own words: "*A Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" (Verse 2). Even God's attributes mentioned in Abraham's prayer are used at the end of these verses to remind the Muslim community of God's favours: "*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3)

When the Prophet was asked about himself, his answer was: "I am the answer to Abraham's, my father's, prayer, and the good news given by Jesus. When my mother was pregnant, she saw a light coming out of her, lighting before her the palaces of Buṣrā in Syria."

"*It is He who has sent to the unlettered people a Messenger from among themselves to declare to them His revelations, to purify them and to instruct them in the Book and in wisdom, yet before that they were indeed in manifest*

error." (Verse 2) The favour God has granted to these unlettered people is evident: He chose them to hold the trust embodied in His final message and sent them a Messenger from among themselves to elevate them to a noble position. He took them out of their state of ignorance, highlighted in their being unlettered, giving them instructions in God's book and in wisdom. Thus, their situation changed completely, clearly making them distinguished among all other people on earth.

"*To purify them.*" What the Prophet gave them was far-reaching purification. He purified their feelings and consciences, their actions and behaviour, their marital and family lives as also their social lives. Their purification meant that they rose from the depths of idolatrous beliefs to believing in God's oneness, from erroneous concepts and enigmatic legends to the true and clear faith, from disgraceful immorality to the clean moral values propounded by Islam, from the filthy gains of usury and fraud to clean and legitimate earnings. It was a total purification of the individual and the community, of inner feelings and outward life. Such purification elevates man and his concepts, his role and existence to the high horizon of maintaining his bond with God and with the community on high.

"*To instruct them in the Book and in wisdom.*" When they are thus instructed, they become the holders of a divine book. They thus learn how to evaluate matters properly. They can also make accurate judgements and define their course in life in the light of such wisdom.

"*Yet before that they were indeed in manifest error.*" (Verse 2) During their pre-Islamic days, they were certainly in manifest error. Their situation is best described by Ja'far ibn Abī Ṭālib when he was questioned about Islam by Negus, the King of Abyssinia. A number of Muslims had migrated there when the Prophet wanted to establish a new base for Islam. The Quraysh, in turn, had also sent a delegation led by 'Amr ibn al-'Āṣ to request their extradition. 'Amr tried to paint a distorted picture of the Muslim immigrants to the king, but the Negus wanted to listen to their version. In this context, Ja'far said to him:

> In our recent past we were ignorant people: we worshipped idols, ate carrion, committed all sorts of sins, attached little value to maintaining good relations with our kinsfolk and behaved badly

to our neighbours. Our overruling maxim was that might was right. This continued to be our situation until God sent us, from among ourselves, a Messenger whose good name, honesty, sincerity and integrity were well known to us. He called on us to believe in God, the one and only God, and to stop worshipping all idols which we and our forefathers used to worship alongside Him. He commanded us always to speak the truth and be honest, to be good to our relatives and neighbours, to preserve life and shed no blood, to refrain from sin, perjury, robbing the property of orphans entrusted to our care, and making false accusations against honourable women. He also commanded us to devote our worship to God alone, ascribing to Him no partners of any sort. He further commanded us to pray regularly, to give away certain purifying alms and to fast, etc.[1]

Worthy of Trust

Despite all their negative qualities during their pre-Islamic days, God knew that the Arabs were the ones to be entrusted with the new faith and that they would be true to their trust. He was also aware of their great potential once they were put on the right way. They could use all this potential for their new faith, whereas the Israelites no longer had it. The latter had endured humiliation for a long time in Egypt under Pharaonic rule. As a result they portrayed many aspects of deviation and ill feeling. Indeed, they were unable to rid themselves of these negative effects, whether during Moses' lifetime, or later. Hence, they incurred God's anger and deserved to be expelled from His grace. He, therefore, removed the trust of His faith from them for the rest of human life.

In His perfect and absolute knowledge, God knew that the Arabian Peninsula was the best cradle for His new faith. This was a faith that aimed to liberate the whole world from the erroneous ways of ignorance and rid it of the decadence that had eaten deep into the great civilizations,

1. Adil Salahi, *Muhammad: Man and Prophet*, The Islamic Foundation, Leicestershire, 2002, p. 129.

leaving them hollow. At that time, the state of the world was very low, as described by J.H. Denison, a European writer:

> In the fifth and sixth centuries the civilized world stood on the verge of chaos. The old emotional cultures that had made civilization possible, since they had given to men a sense of unity and of reverence for their rulers, had broken down, and nothing had been found adequate to take their place...
>
> It seemed then that the great civilization that it had taken four thousand years to construct was on the verge of disintegration, and that mankind was likely to return to that condition of barbarism where every tribe and sect was against the next, and law and order were unknown. *The old tribal sanctions had lost their power. Hence the old imperial methods would no longer operate.* The new sanctions created by Christianity were working division and destruction instead of unity and order. It was a time fraught with tragedy. Civilization, like a gigantic tree whose foliage had overreached the world and whose branches had borne the golden fruits of art and science and literature, stood tottering, its trunk no longer alive with the flowing sap of devotion and reverence, but rotted to the core...
>
> It was among these people that the man was born who was to unite the whole known world of the east and south... Mohammed...[2]

This is the view of an European author, but from the Islamic perspective, conditions looked far darker and gloomier. God chose a Bedouin nation in a largely desert peninsula to be entrusted with His faith, knowing that once put on the right course, their mentality

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2. Denison, J.H., *Emotion as the Basis of Civilization*, New York and London, 1928, pp. 265–269.

– This quotation runs in the Arabic text as one continuous paragraph. Apparently, the author relied on a quoted text in a book by an Indian author which was translated into Arabic. It may be that the original quotation was an abridged one, and it may be that when it was translated, some variation of emphasis occurred in places. The italicized sentence is omitted in the Arabic text, but it was felt necessary to include it here in order not to affect the flow of the author's meaning. – Editor's note.

and qualities would enable them to shoulder this great responsibility. Moreover, they had the potential to willingly deliver great sacrifices for their faith. Therefore, He raised His last Messenger among them, to recite His revelations to them, purify them and instruct them in His book and in wisdom, thus ridding them of all traces of their old, greatly erroneous ways.

"*To them and to others yet to join them.*" (Verse 3) We have several reports explaining who these others are. Al-Bukhārī relates on Abū Hurayrah's authority: "We were sitting with the Prophet when *Sūrah al-Jumu'ah*, or The Congregation, was revealed to him, including the statement, '*to them and to others yet to join them*'. People asked who were these, but the Prophet did not answer until they had repeated their question three times. Salmān the Persian was among us. The Prophet put his hand on Salmān and said: 'Were faith to be at the top of the sky, some people or a man from among his community would attain it'." This authentic *ḥadīth* makes clear that this Qur'ānic statement includes the Persians. Hence, in his commentary on this verse, Mujāhid says: "This is a reference to all non-Arabs who believe in the Prophet."

Another *ḥadīth* is reported by Sahl ibn Sa'd who quotes the Prophet as saying: "Among the seed of the seed of the seed of men and women in my community there are some who will be admitted into heaven without having to face any reckoning of their deeds. He then quoted the verse that says: '*to them and to others yet to join them*'." This means that these belong to much later generations of Muslims.

Both these interpretations are valid. The Qur'ānic statement refers to people other than the Arabs, and to ones other than the generation that witnessed the revelation of the Qur'ān. It indicates that the Muslim community transcends both geographical area and generational context. It continues to be true to its great trust, faithful to the full form of the divine faith.

"*He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 3) He is able to choose as He pleases, and in His wisdom He is fully aware of the most appropriate choices. His choice, of both the earlier and the later generations, means a great honour to those thus chosen: "*Such is God's favour: He grants it to whom He will. God is One who bestows great favours.*" (Verse 4)

God's choice of a community or an individual to be responsible for the great truth, to receive the light that emanates from Him, to be the link between the earth and heaven, is a favour of unparalleled proportions. It exceeds by far any sacrifices such an individual or community may give, in wealth, effort and life. It outweighs all the trouble they may undertake, the opposition they have to encounter and the hard struggle they have to endure. God thus reminds the Muslim community in Madīnah, as well as those who will come after it, of the great favour He has granted them when He chose them for this task, sending them a Messenger to purify them and instruct them in the divine book and in wisdom. God's Messenger also left a great wealth of wisdom for future generations, whereby they learn from the practical example of that first Muslim community.

One Role Ended

The *sūrah* then adds a statement that implies that the Israelites' role as trustees of God's message has ended. Their hearts are no longer alert, dedicated and active enough to enable them to live up to the trust they were once given:

> *Those who were entrusted with the burden of implementing the Torah but then failed to do so are like an ass that carries a load of books. Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.* (Verse 5)

The Israelites were entrusted with the Torah, and charged with being true to the faith and the divine law, but they '*failed to do so*'. The initial duty of this trust is to formulate a thorough and correct understanding of the divine message, and then to implement it both within one's own life and in human life at large. Yet the history of the Israelites, as it was in the true picture painted in the Qur'ān, indicates that they did not appreciate the trust given to them. They neither understood its nature nor were they true to it. As such, they were like the example given in the *sūrah*: "*Like an ass that carries a load of books*". The ass benefits nothing by the books it carries. It only feels their heavy load. This is a miserable picture, but

it represents a true situation: "*Wretched is the example of those who deny God's revelations. God does not guide the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 5)

Likewise are all those who were given the trust of divine faith but who failed to live up to it. Muslims across many generations, as well as those living today, who have Muslim names but who fail to live up to what Islam requires, and particularly those who read the Qur'ān and Islamic books but fall short of what is required of them, are indeed like the ass carrying a load of heavy books. Unfortunately, these are numerous. The question is not that of books being carried: it is a question of understanding the books and putting into practice the teachings they impart.

The Israelites used always to allege that they were God's chosen people and His beloved race, while all others are Goyim or Gentiles. They claimed that in their position they were not required to observe the laws of their own religion in their dealings with the rest of mankind: "*For they say: "We have no obligation to keep faith with Gentiles." Thus they deliberately say of God what they know to be a lie.*" (3: 75) They made many other false allegations, providing no evidence in support of them. Therefore, the *sūrah* invites them to make a mutual prayer. This invitation was also made on other occasions to Christian and pagan groups:

> *Say: 'You who follow the Jewish faith! If you truly claim that out of all people you are God's friends, then wish for death, if your claim is true.' But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers. Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'* (Verses 6–8)

What this invitation entails is that the two groups stand together face to face and they all pray to God to inflict punishment on the group upholding falsehood. All groups the Prophet invited to such mutual prayer feared to do so; essentially, they refused to take up the challenge. This indicates that deep inside they realized that what the Prophet said was the truth and that his faith was true. "Ibn 'Abbās reports that Abū

Jahl once said: 'If I see Muḥammad praying at the Ka'bah, I will go to him and put my foot on his neck.' When the Prophet heard this, he said: 'Had he tried to do so, the angels would have taken him away in broad daylight. Had the Jews wished for death, they would have died and seen their places in hell.' Also true is that had those invited to mutual prayer stood against the Prophet in such prayer, they would have returned home to find their families and properties perished." [Related by Aḥmad, al-Bukhārī, al-Nasā'ī and al-Tirmidhī.]

These verses may only represent a challenge to them, rather than an invitation to mutual prayer. Since they alleged that they were God's only friends among all mankind, why would they fear death, and reveal themselves to be so cowardly? If their claims were true, they would be in a position of favour with God after they die. So why does the prospect of death fill them with fear? This challenge is followed by a statement making it clear that their claims were untrue. They were aware that they had not done enough good deeds to ensure a good position with God or to hope for His reward. On the contrary, they often indulged in sin, and such indulgences made them fear death and what comes after it. A person who has not prepared for his journey will always be in fear of what may happen along the road: "*But they will never wish for it because of what their hands have wrought in this life. God is well aware of the wrongdoers.*" (Verse 7)

A statement follows that establishes the nature of death and what comes after it. It shows them that their attempts to escape from death are of little use. It will inevitably overtake them. After death, all will return to God where they will have their deeds reckoned and where they will face the consequences of the same: "*Say: 'The death from which you are trying to run away will certainly overtake you. You will then be returned to the One who knows the imperceptible and that which can be witnessed. He will then tell you all that you have done.'*" (Verses 8)

This Qur'ānic statement makes clear to the addressees and to everyone else the truth that people often overlook and prefer not to think about, despite facing it all the time: namely, this life is bound to end. To stay away from God during one's lifetime will not avert a person from returning to Him, for there is no refuge from God except by returning to Him. The reckoning of everyone's deeds will inevitably follow this

return. There is simply no escape. The Prophet is quoted as saying: "A person who tries to run away from death is like a fox who owes a debt to the earth. He went out roaming until he was exhausted and bleeding. When he went into his hole, the earth said to him: 'Fox! Repay the debt you owe me.' He went out again wounded. He continued to bleed and his neck was cut. He then died." [Related by al-Ṭabarī.] This *ḥadīth* so delivers a highly moving and effective picture.

The Congregation on Friday

The last section of the *sūrah* provides certain teachings concerning Friday and its congregational prayer. It refers to an event that might have been repeated; given the way it is described suggests such repetition:

> *Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading. This is best for you, if you but knew it. When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful. Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.'* (Verses 9–11)

Friday Prayer is a weekly prayer that must be offered in congregation. It cannot be offered by anyone on his own. Muslims meet in Friday Prayer and listen to a sermon that reminds them of their duties towards God. We can say that it is an organizational prayer, following the Islamic method of preparing for this life and the life to come together by the same measures and the same acts of worship. Friday Prayer gives a clear and specific impression of the nature of the Islamic faith and the Muslim community, which we explained in our commentary on the previous *sūrah*, The Ranks.

There are many *aḥādīth* that speak of the value, importance and special position of this prayer, encouraging its observation after preparing for it by undertaking specific cleanliness and purification rituals. Ibn 'Umar quotes the Prophet as saying: "When any of you wishes to attend Friday

Prayer, he should take a bath." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.] Aws ibn Aws quotes the Prophet as saying: "Whoever washes himself and takes a bath on Friday, going out early, walking to the mosque rather than riding, draws close to the imam, listens and refrains from idle talk, will be rewarded for each step the equivalent of fasting and observing night prayer for a whole year." [Related by al-Nasā'ī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Tirmidhī and Ibn Mājah.] Imām Aḥmad reports on the authority of Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī that he heard the Prophet saying: "Whoever takes a bath on Friday, wears a touch of perfume if he has it, puts on some of his best clothes, goes out to the mosque where he offers voluntary prayers if he so wishes, doing no harm to anyone, listens to the imam when he delivers his sermon and then joins the prayer, all his sins between that prayer and the Friday before it will be forgiven."

The first verse in this section orders Muslims to leave off all business once they hear the call to prayer: "*Believers! When the call to prayer is made on Friday, go straightaway to the prayer and leave off your trading.*" (Verse 9) It provides encouragement for so abandoning anything related to the life of this world and its concerns: "*This is best for you, if you but knew it.*" (Verse 9) This suggests that leaving off trade and business was not easy; it required such encouragement. Moreover, it provides good and repeated education. Every now and then, people need a period of time when they free themselves from their preoccupation with earning a living and the attractions of worldly life. They need such periods when they can be in close contact with their Lord, glorifying Him and experiencing the happiness resulting from dedication to His service. They need to fill their hearts and lungs with the pure, clean and refreshing air that comes with such dedication.

When they have done so, they can then return to their business, continuing to remember God: "*When the prayer is finished, disperse in the land and seek God's bounty. Remember God often so that you may be successful.*" (Verse 10) The Islamic system provides a perfect balance between the needs of life on earth, with all that it requires of work and effort, and the need to be away from all this for a short while to attend to worship. Time spent away from the preoccupations of this life is necessary to keep the heart alive. Without it, it cannot live up to the great trust God has given us and nor can it fulfil its duties. It is

important to remember God while we are busy earning our living, for such remembrance transforms our work activities into acts of worship. Nevertheless, we need such short periods of complete dedication to worship, as clearly implied in the last two verses.

'Irāk ibn Mālik, a Companion of the Prophet, used to stand near the door of the mosque after Friday Prayer and say: "My Lord! I have responded to Your call, offered the prayer You made obligatory, and I am dispersing as You have commanded me. Give me of Your bounty, for You are the best of providers." [Related by Ibn Abī Ḥātim.] These words show us how such a person treated the matter seriously but also in a very simple way. The verses give orders and these orders are carried out to the letter. Such a clear, simple and yet serious understanding is perhaps the secret behind the first Muslim community's rise to the high level it achieved, despite all the distractions it had to deal with, as described in the last verse: "*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there. Say: 'That which is with God is far better than any entertainment or trade. God is the best of providers.*" (Verse 11)

Jābir ibn 'Abdullāh reports: "We were attending the prayer with the Prophet when a caravan carrying food arrived. People flocked to it, and only 12 men remained with the Prophet, including Abū Bakr and 'Umar. God then revealed the verse that says: '*Yet when people see some trade or entertainment, they head off towards it, leaving you standing there*'." The verse makes clear that what is with God is better than trade and entertainment. It reminds them that all that they have is provided by God who is the best of providers.

This event shows the great effort that was needed in order to mould the community that rose to the highest level achieved by any community of believers in human history. It also encourages those who advocate God's message in all generations to remain patient. They are bound to encounter weaknesses, for human beings often yield and fall prey to temptation. Yet they must remember that man is also able to rise to sublime standards of purity and dedication. What is needed to help such a rise is patience, proper understanding, perseverance and entertaining no thoughts of quitting midway.